

In Our Own Words

Thoughts on the experience of evacuation and extended separation

“Why don’t you go back to Iraq?!”

Prior to joining the FS, I would never have imagined a year apart from my husband or even long separations. Several events in 2003 led us to choose a year posting in Iraq for my husband, while I remained in DC with our three small children, (6, 3 and 1 year old). I think it was harder on my husband than me--he was in a dangerous world without his family, while I was in my comfortable home with my normal life and children--fewer meals to cook and less suits to bring to the cleaners. We had regular daily communication, usually 4 or more emails per day, and he had a cell phone. The cell phone was most useful when I heard about rocket attacks on the green zone--I could call and immediately know that he was safe.

Factors that allowed this separation to be relatively easy were:

- It was planned--unexpected trips are much harder since they interfere with our routine. We planned-out lawn care and did extra things like the oil change on the car when he was home for visits.
- I have a good sitter who is available at the last minute.
- I have been in the DC area for 5 years and it feels like home--I have many friends who invite us for the holidays, so we have kept busy.
- My personality is probably the single most important element.

As far as the children, again we did not really do or so anything special and had only a few adjustment issues. For the most part, they were excited when their daddy came home to visit and seemed fine when he left again. He had been away before on extended TDYs and probably the only difference was the danger of Iraq--but they were never aware of the danger. My kids don't watch TV so they were not watching the news.

My daughter's school arranged a special session with the counselor for kids whose fathers had been deployed to the Gulf, but the counselor decided my daughter didn't seem like she was having any issues. I also got her a book (from the Army) about daddies going away, but really could have cared less. My son wondered why his Dad had to go to the city for "BadDad" confusing the name Baghdad and was convinced that his Daddy must have done something terrible.

When my husband came home for visits, he did face some challenges trying to discipline the three-year-old, who simply would say things like, " Why don't you just go back to Iraq? " At the same time, the three-year-old also told people that he was "half-orphan," that he used to have a daddy to eat chicken wings with and that he wished he could take him out of the picture frame to play with him sometimes.

When my husband came home to stay, it was like he had not been gone at all. He was a little surprised about some of the new skills the kids had learned, and was still operating under the assumption that they were a year younger, but really not much had changed.